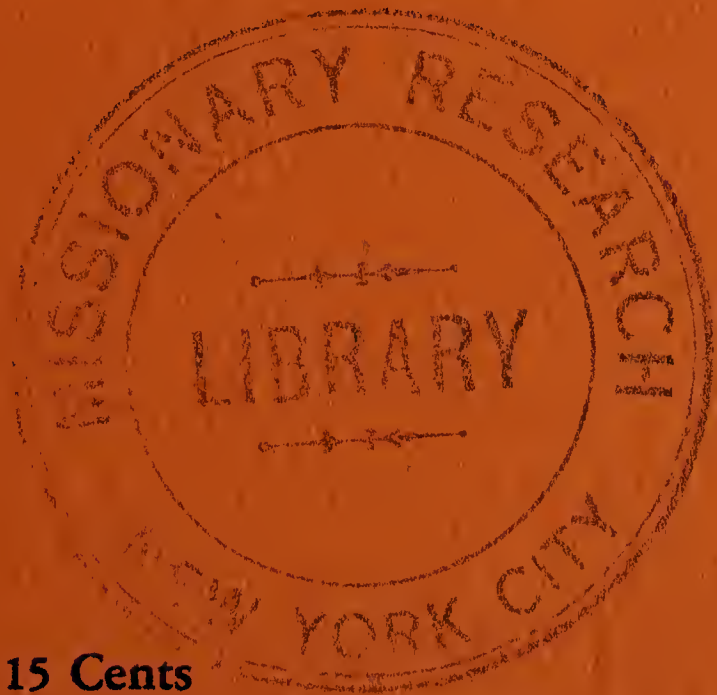


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Red, Rash, and Religious

The Story of
WILLIAM DONALD McCLURE

By
A MISSIONARY COLLEAGUE



15 Cents

STUDENT VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT
156 Fifth Avenue, New York

“Red, Rash, and Religious”

William Donald McClure

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A MISSIONARY COLLEAGUE

IN LATE SUMMER, 1940, a morning sun beat fiercely down upon the little clumps of grass-roofed mud huts strung along the brimming banks of the Sobat River, just above its junction with the White Nile. The whole African plain shimmered in its bright light. But shielded behind fields of thick-standing sorghum corn a pathetic drama was being enacted in the village of Palo.

Leaned up against the opened door of one of a circle of four huts, face forward, was the stiffened body of a young Shulla boy. He might have been mistaken for a corpse but for the blood streaming from cuts that arched from one ankle up over thigh and shoulders, and down again across the opposite thigh to the other ankle. Half-clad father and mother, seated in Shulla custom on legs bent back under them, watched stoically as an old witch doctor cut the throat of a sacrificial chicken, sprinkled its blood to mingle with that of their son, and muttered the final incantations designed to rout the evil spirits of disease. A village elder, some old women, and a group of curious children who had been banished to the far side of the farthest hut were the only other people in sight.

Suddenly the entire group, with the exception of the boy victim, was electrified. Out from the shadows of the path through the corn that grew to the edge of the village circle stepped a white man, clad in khaki shorts, white shirt open at the throat, and sun helmet. He was of naturally ruddy countenance, with a fringe of red hair showing under his head covering; bare arms and knees were burned brown; the spring of his step told of a healthy body. He had taken only a few strides into the village before he noticed the boy's blood-smeared form, stiff as a board, propped against the hut door. Before

the old witch doctor realized what was happening, the sacrificial chicken had been seized from his hands and was hurtling through the air out over the cornfield. To join it sailed the witch doctor's heavy club and shield, accompanied by a miscellaneous collection of trinkets that constituted his "tools." Ashen-gray went the black man's face with rage he could not conceal, but there was no opportunity to give it expression. In a few well-chosen words of the tribal tongue, he was ordered out of the village, and away he ran. Then the white man turned and eased the wounded lad to the ground and back into the coolness of the grass-roofed *tukl*. When finally he emerged from the low hut door and straightened up in the bright sunshine again, anger was gone from his countenance.

Don McClure then sat down on the ground beside the poor ignorant parents. Patiently, he recounted the events of the preceding two weeks: that first urgent call that brought him and the mission nurse to the side of the black lad; the nurse's careful diagnosis of the constant spasms of pain as symptomatic of tetanus; the thrice-daily trips of the nurse to the village in a desperate attempt to win the lad back to life; the occasion when the despairing parents had dug the grave by the side of the hut; the coming of the entire native staff of the mission school to pray publicly for the lad's recovery in the name of the compassionate healer, Jesus; the succumbing of the parents to village opinion and the heavy payment made for the witch doctor's séance. He pressed home the necessity for irrevocable choice between the spirits with which the witch doctor claimed communion and the Infinite Spirit *Jwok*, who had shown his love and concern for men in the person of his own son. Father and mother solemnly chose to rely upon God, and their choice was sealed in simple prayer. Later, God sealed their choice in the healing of their son.

It is a fearful thing to challenge witchcraft in the heart of an African tribe. But Don McClure has been doing such things all his life. It was a fearful thing to pitch into the big bullies of the grade school, realizing that he had to come out of the fight with arms and legs sufficiently intact to fulfil his responsibility of getting a crippled sister safely through to school on coaster wagon or sled. But the fight was never refused when there was just cause. It was a serious matter to stand before the richest friend he ever had, a millionaire engineer of Pittsburgh, and refuse heed both to flattering financial offers and denunciations of his resolve to spend his life in Christ's service

among the people of Africa. But his adamant position left a philanthropically inclined but unconverted materialist visibly shaken. It was a fearful thing to face the charge of a wounded bull buffalo, but a steady shot brought the animal to his knees less than fifty yards away. It required courage to sail with wife and three little children in May, 1940, on a slow freighter headed through the Mediterranean after the few prospective fellow passengers, who were single men, had canceled their passage because of ominous news from Europe. But a warm, confident smile lighted the face of Don McClure.

William Donald McClure came honestly by his all-round ability and his intrepid nature. His mother, Margaret McNaugher, was the daughter of a family that has contributed more than one famous name to the annals of western Pennsylvania in the fields of education, law, theology, engineering, and medicine. Before her marriage to Robert Elmer McClure, she held a college chair of Greek and Latin. She had a great zest for adventurous living, or she never would have chosen as her life partner one of the "McClure boys," whose escapades were well known in the West Middletown neighborhood of Washington County. But Robert had turned out to be a preacher, and the home to which he brought Margaret McNaugher McClure was the manse of the United Presbyterian Church in the village of Blairsville, Pennsylvania.

The manse in Blairsville has never been a quiet place. Not that there was ever lack of discipline in it, but laughter and the hum of industrious living have always filled its rooms. William Donald was born there on the twenty-eighth day of April, 1906, the second son and third child in a family of four boys and three girls. Although the mother was an able manager and the father a much better financier than most bankers, both parents cultivated self-reliance in their brood. As a result, Don, although conscious of parental ability to "see him through," has always depended upon himself. Family gifts he has used as springboards from which to dive into one adventure after another, intent upon tasting life's joys and sharing them generously with a multitude of friends.

But early in childhood, Don learned the meaning of tragedy. A dearly loved younger sister was stricken with infantile paralysis and left a cripple. Not a little of the mature missionary's willingness to turn by day or night to tender ministry of healing for some

disease-stricken African stems from a small boy's guardianship of a life held more precious than his own.

It was a lad with perpetually sunny disposition that endeared himself to teachers, fellow students, and playmates, in spite of the fact that they were constantly on the receiving end of some mischief. From ringleadership of the "gang," Don, in spite of his short stature, graduated into formal leadership of high-school athletic teams. The idol of smaller boys, he capitalized upon their esteem by advising them on honest, clean living; and he practiced what he preached.

The natural choice of school for undergraduate study was Westminster College, at New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, for his mother, brother, and sister had studied there. Don threw himself enthusiastically into studies, social and religious activities, and sports. When he had to choose between cramming for classes or cultivating worthwhile friendships, the latter always won. Everyone who knew him recognized the aptness of the college *Annual's* description, "red, rash, and religious."

"I have never known a time when I did not profess Jesus Christ to be my Lord and Master," wrote Don McClure at a decision point in life. "My spiritual development has been a gradual growth in knowledge and appreciation of spiritual matters. . . . While there have been not a few mountaintop experiences, there has never, to the best of my recollection, been a 'Slough of Despond.' . . . Each day my companionship with the Master grows more precious. I expect that to be the rule of my life."

Upon graduation, he volunteered as teacher in a mission school for boys in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. One could scarcely pack into three years more of living than he did. There were the first contacts with Sudanese people, who, whether Arab or Negroid in racial strain, are attractive and so little known as to be absorbingly interesting to any foreigner. To McClure, they were all that and a lot more, for he made the winning of individuals among them to faith in Christ the chief outlet for his boundless energy. There were the long months when he found himself unexpectedly in charge of an agricultural school, a large dairy herd of cross-bred Holstein-Sudani stock, and a sizable irrigation project. Wide responsibilities led him into unlikely fields, such as veterinary science, in which he chalked up a successful surgical operation on a draft camel. There were the

vacations spent hiking in Palestine and Europe—because hiking was cheap. There was the big-game hunt along the upper reaches of the Nile, in which his father joined him from America.

This last experience, at the end of his period of contract, determined McClure's future. It was while in the southern Sudan that he first met the Nilotic tribesmen. Tall, lithe, black as ebony, the individual Shulla, Nuer, Dinka, or Anuak makes a striking picture, never to be forgotten. After sharing the fortunes of the hunt with several of them over a period of weeks, the journey back to America became one long dream of future service among them, for he had come to love them as brothers. Returning to the homeland on the same ship was another short-term missionary from the Sudan, Miss Lyda Boyd. A close friendship had revealed to both of them that Africa would some day reclaim them, together.

Seeking thorough preparation for his lifework, McClure matriculated in Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After one year of study, he persuaded Miss Boyd to share with him the "certain uncertainties" of a student-preacher's existence. This meant a village pastorate while he was still carrying the work of the classroom. A fellow student gained this impression of him: "Almost unlimited capacity for hard work. . . . Seminary, pastorate, mission speaking, summer-conference managership, big-game-hunting lectures, blood donor . . . radiant life . . . Christ's man willing. God didn't need to bend, break, or remake Don McClure; simply send." God did send him back to Africa, through the Board of Foreign Missions of the United Presbyterian Church.

In the midst of the Shulla tribe at Doleib Hill, five miles from the mouth of the Sobat River, the McClures were soon plunged into language study, agricultural teaching, animal husbandry, emergency medical service, property upkeep, Bible classes, village evangelism. Life was never dull. There were wild-eyed oxen to be broken to the plow. There were the traditional village spear fights that brought casualties to the back door. There were marauding hyenas, lions, and crocodiles that had to be hunted. Every recreation, as well as duty, had its definite part to play in gaining a hearing for the Gospel among superstitious pagans or in revealing to weak native fellow Christians the abundant life God meant them to have in Christ. A zeal for preaching was linked with a resourceful and practical approach to every mission problem.

Without either of these, Don McClure would not have been chosen by his mission to pioneer on the Sudan-Ethiopia border. Far up on the headwaters of the Sobat, beyond the Shulla and Nuer tribes, among which the United Presbyterian Mission already carried on a varied missionary program, lived a kindred Nilotic tribe known as the Anuaks. Only a small portion of the tribe's farming and grazing lands came under the administration of the friendly British officials of the Sudan Government. The majority of the tribe had their villages in territory governed by the Italian conquerors of Ethiopia, which made for complications. But tales of Anuakland stirred the imagination and faith of the organized young people's societies of the Church in America, and they rallied to the support of a mission to the Anuaks. Following exploratory trips in which McClure participated, it was decided in 1936 to open an Anuak station on the west bank of the Pibor River, near the government post of Akobo.

With two native elders from the Christian community at Doleib Hill as companions and a heavily laden secondhand, two-ton truck as transport, McClure set out across the forest-dotted plain east of Doleib Hill toward the end of February, 1938. The aim of the expedition was the erection of a carefully planned group of four glorified native huts, with concrete floors, windows, and screened verandas, before the opening of the season of torrential rains. The difficult journey to Akobo was made in three days. Tents were pitched, building-sand deposit was found, Anuak tribesmen were hired, mud walls were begun, and school and church were inaugurated under the leadership of an Anuak convert from the nearest mission station to the north. With construction under way, Don headed the truck back toward Doleib Hill for a second and last load of building materials. The time when Lydia McClure should be delivered of her second child was near; news from the hospital in Khartoum some six hundred miles away might even be awaiting the man at the wheel when he reached Doleib Hill. But no news greeted him upon arrival, and it was two weeks before the welcome message came faintly over the wires from the nearest telegraph station: "A boy. All well." Immediately the truck, long since loaded to the roof for the return journey into the interior, turned its back to a setting sun, for not even a night could be wasted if the new mission house was to be roofed before the rains came.

This time, unknowingly, Don McClure was speeding into trouble. Many miles short of Akobo, deep ruts, plowed by the feet of elephants and thousands of antelope, brought disaster. A front axle snapped, and the truck lurched to a sudden stop. Attempts to repair it proved fruitless. On the second day, a chance road truck bound for Akobo Post picked up the stranded missionary. It was two weeks before his own crippled vehicle could be brought into the work camp with the desperately needed bamboo roof poles. Then came malaria to lay low the architect-supervisor-carpenter-mason, already weakened by persistent infectious sores on a pair of skinned shins. Homesick and delirious with fever, Don fought and won the greatest battle of his life. The heavy rains that enabled the first government steamer of the season to push its way up the swelling Pibor River fell upon expertly fashioned grass roofs that protected the future home of the McClure family. They also beat upon a little church-school building, erected by the hands of the people of the neighboring Anuak villages. It was a grateful and triumphant red-head that boarded the little steamer on its return journey and bade farewell, until next dry season, to the newest mission station in that thin line of Christian outposts that guards the heart of pagan Africa against the religious penetration of Islam.

A year of mingled joy and sorrow was spent by the McClures at Akobo, without much response from a people whose language still required satisfactory reduction to written form, to say nothing of grammatical analysis in preparation for the translation of the Bible and books required for the schools. Then came furlough, which was spent in study at Cornell University and in observation of the best examples of educational work in the southern United States. Before the return journey to the field was completed, the European War had spilled over into Africa through Italy's entrance into the war, and residence on the undefended border of the Sudan had become impossible. The McClures were once more assigned to Doleib Hill.

This was return to fellowship with missionary colleagues and a little nucleus of native Christians whose physical courage and spiritual daring had stood the test when they joined in the venture across tribal boundaries to carry the Gospel into Anuakland. Yet thirty-nine years of devoted service on the part of many missionaries, one of whom had given his eyesight, some of whom had given

their lives, and more of whom had given their health, had not brought into being what could be termed a spiritually strong indigenous church at Doleib Hill. Then came the moving of God's spirit. The incident related in the introduction to this sketch was but one of a number, the accumulated effect of which led to confessions of sin, earnest seeking of instruction in the word of God, and the building of village churches by communities that had seemed hardened against the message of God's love. Not least among the factors that have worked to bring hundreds of Nilotic tribesmen to Christ in the past two years has been Don McClure's confidence that God is able to work a miracle of grace in the heart of his black, African brother.

Don once set out over an unknown stretch of African bush, accepting at face value an English road supervisor's assurance that the trail was "just like a boulevard." Friends who anticipated a message of arrival the following day were rewarded after several days with the following: "Arrived safely. Road no boulevard. Don." The road of the pioneer missionary in Africa is indeed no boulevard, but if one follows it hand in hand with African brothers, it leads close to the heart of God.

Meet seventeen other fascinating missionaries in

Answering Distant Calls

edited by MABEL H. ERDMAN

This pamphlet is a reprint of a chapter in the volume, ANSWERING DISTANT CALLS.

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